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Critical Race Theory, Racial Microaggressions, and Campus Racial Climate: The Experiences of African American College Students

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Microaggressions are subtle insults (verbal, nonverbal, and/or visual) directed toward people of color, often automatically or unconsciously. Using critical race theory as a framework, the study described in this article provides an examination of racial microaggressions and how they influence the collegiate racial climate. Using focus group interview data from African American students at three universities, it reveals that racial microaggressions exist in both academic and social spaces in the collegiate environment. The study shows how African American students experience and respond to racial microaggressions. It also demonstrates how racial microaggressions have a negative impact on the campus racial climate.

> . . . one must not look for the gross and obvious. The subtle, cumulative miniassault is the substance of today's racism. . . (Pierce, 1974, p. 516)

> In and of itself a microaggression may seem harmless, but the cumulative burden of a lifetime of microaggressions can theoretically contribute to diminished mortality, augmented morbidity, and flattened confidence. (Pierce, 1995, p. 281)

These two epigraphs by psychiatrist Chester Pierce over a 21-year period speak volumes about an important, persistent, and underresearched social problem in the United States: racial microaggressions. Little is known about microaggressions, and yet this subtle form of racism has a dramatic impact on the lives of African Americans. Pierce and his colleagues have defined racial microaggressions as "subtle, stunning, often automatic, and nonverbal exchanges which are 'put downs' of blacks by offenders" (Pierce, Carew, Pierce–Gonzalez, & Wills, 1978, p. 66). They further maintain that these "offensive mechanisms used against blacks often are innocuous" and that the "cumulative weight of their never-ending burden is the major ingredient in black–white interactions" (p. 66). Additionally, Davis (1989) defined racial microaggressions as "stunning, automatic acts of disregard that stem from unconscious attitudes of white superiority and constitute a verification of black inferiority" (p. 1576).

Racial microaggressions, or unconscious and subtle forms of racism, though pervasive, are seldom investigated (Delgado & Stefancic, 1992; Johnson, 1988; Lawrence, 1987; Solórzano, 1998). Occasionally, African American students get a glimpse into the world of unconscious racism as demonstrated in comments such as those related to us by students who participated in the study described in this article: "When I [a White person] talk

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about those Blacks, I really wasn't talking about *you*," "You [a Black person] are not like the rest of them. *You're* different," "If only there were more of *them* [Black people] like *you* [a Black person]," and "I don't think of *you* [a Black person] as Black." Referring to White authority figures in particular (i.e., judges and other criminal justice authorities), Davis (1989) has suggested that Whites are capable of such utterances because "cognitive habit, history, and culture [have made them] unable to hear the range of relevant voices and grapple with what reasonably might be said in the voice of discrimination's victims" (p. 1576). Subsequently, as Pierce (1974) maintained, each Black person "must be taught to recognize these microaggressions and construct his future by taking appropriate action at each instance of recognition" (p. 520).

Race, Racism, and Racial Microaggressions

Our study of the collegiate racial climate and the effect of racial microaggressions begins by defining race and racism. One can argue that dominant groups often attempt to legitimate their position via ideological means or a set of beliefs that explains or justifies some actual or potential social arrangement. According to Banks (1995), an examination of U.S. history reveals that the "color line" of race is a socially constructed category, created to differentiate racial groups and to show the superiority or dominance of one race—in particular, Whites—over others. Yet, does racial domination require a rationalizing ideology? If racism is the ideology that justifies the dominance of one race over another, then how do we define racism?

For the purposes of this study, Lorde's (1992) definition of racism is perhaps the most concise: "the belief in the inherent superiority of one race over all others and thereby the right to dominance" (p. 496). Marable (1992) defined racism as "a system of ignorance, exploitation, and power used to oppress African-Americans, Latinos, Asians, Pacific Americans, American Indians and other people on the basis of ethnicity, culture, mannerisms, and color" (p. 5). His definition is especially important because it shifts the discussion of race and racism from a Black–White discourse to one that includes multiple faces, voices, and experiences. Embedded in both definitions, however, are at least three important points:

(1) one group believes itself to be superior,
(2) the group that believes itself to be superior has the power to carry out the racist behavior, and
(3) racism affects multiple racial and ethnic groups.

Lorde's and Marable's definitions posit that racism is about institutional power, a form of power that people of color—that is, non-Whites—in the United States have never possessed.[1] It is also important to note that overt racist acts are usually not socially condoned and that examples of overt racism in the public discourse are rare. For example, Kennedy (1989) found that "although overt forms of racial domination described thus far were enormously destructive, *covert* color bars have been, in a certain sense, even more insidious [emphasis in original]" (p. 1752). Indeed, it is typically in subtle and covert ways (i.e., private conversations) that racism manifests itself. These innocuous forms of racist behavior constitute racial microaggressions.

[1]In this study, people, faculty, scholars, and students of color are defined as those persons of African American, Latino, Asian American, and Native American ancestry. It should be noted that each of these descriptors has a political dimension that this article does not discuss.

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Stereotype Threat and Racial Microaggressions

Any exploration of the racial microaggressions concept must include examination of the cumulative nature of racial stereotypes and their effects. Steele and Aronson's (1995) work reveals that racial stereotypes are deeply woven into the fabric of U.S. society, yet their daily effects are often misunderstood. Specifically, Steele and Aronson examined how such stereotypes may interfere with Black students' abilities to achieve high scores on standardized tests widely believed to measure aptitude or intelligence. Their research found that when African American college students were prompted to indicate their race before taking a Graduate Record Examination (GRE), their tests scores were significantly lower than when they were not prompted to note their race. Steele and Aronson described this phenomenon as "stereotype threat" or:

> . . . a social–psychological predicament that can arise from widely known negative stereotypes about one's group . . . the existence of such a stereotype means that anything one does or any of one's features that conform to it make the stereotypes more plausible as a self-characterization in the eyes of others, and perhaps even in one's own eyes. We call this predicament stereotype threat and argue that it is experienced, essentially, as a self-evaluative threat. (p. 797)

Steele and Aronson's stereotype threat research does "not focus on the internalization of inferiority images or their consequences," but rather examines the "immediate situational threat that derives from the broad dissemination of negative stereotypes about one's group—the threat of possibly being judged and treated stereotypically, or of possibly self-fulfilling such a stereotype" (p. 798). In other words, in a high-stakes testing situation, if African American students are reminded of stereotypes that they are intellectually inferior to Whites, their test performance is depressed.

In the present study, we used a critical race framework to examine how racial climate impacts the undergraduate experiences of African American students through racial microaggressions. We argue specifically that stereotype threat can affect the high-stakes game of college academic achievement in particular. The prospect of conforming to a negative stereotype about African Americans might be enough to undermine an African American college student's performance and achievement and thereby negatively contribute to the collegiate racial climate at his or her institution of higher learning. Our study thus explored the linkages between racial stereotypes, cumulative racial microaggressions, campus racial climate, and academic performance.

Racial Climate and the Undergraduate Experience

In this study, campus racial climate is broadly defined as the overall racial environment of the college campus. Understanding and analyzing the collegiate racial climate is an important part of examining college access, persistence, graduation, and transfer to and through graduate and professional school for African American students. As reported by Carroll (1998); Guinier, Fine, and Balin (1997); Hurtado (1992); and Hurtado, Milem, Clayton–Pedersen, and Allen (1999), when a collegiate racial climate is positive, it includes at least four elements: (a) the inclusion of students, faculty, and administrators of color; (b) a curriculum that reflects the historical and contemporary experiences of people of color; (c) programs to support the recruitment, retention and graduation of students of color; and (d) a college/university mission that reinforces the institution's commitment to pluralism.[2] In its negative form, these researchers conclude, these elements are less likely to exist on college campuses.

[2] Our definitions of pluralism and collegiate racial diversity are synonymous. We define both as manifestations of a situation in which underrepresented racial and ethnic groups are present on the college campus and viewed as equals on the college campus; and where *all* students are willing to affirm one another's dignity, ready to benefit from each other's experience, and willing to acknowledge one another's contributions to the common welfare of students and faculty on the college campus.

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Our research approach provides a critical framework that can be used to study how race and racism, in their micro-level forms, affect the structures, processes, and discourses of the collegiate environment. Utilizing the experiences of African American students as guides, our analysis of collegiate racial climate also takes into account the intersection of racism with other forms of discrimination such as sexism and classism. We assert that a positive collegiate racial climate can facilitate and lead to important, positive academic outcomes for African American students. In contrast, a negative or nonsupportive campus climate is associated with poor academic performance and high dropout rates among African American students (Allen, Epps, & Haniff, 1991; Carroll, 1998; Hurtado et al., 1998).

From this conceptual foundation, our study extends Pierce's construct of racial microaggressions to examine collegiate racial climate and answer the following research questions:
(1) How do African American college students experience racial microaggressions?
(2) What impact do these racial microaggressions have on African American students?
(3) How do African American students respond to racial microaggressions?
(4) How do racial microaggressions affect the collegiate racial climate?

Critical Race Theory, Racial Microaggressions, and Campus Racial Climate

To address racial microaggressions and campus racial climate, we utilized critical race theory (CRT), which draws from and extends a broad literature base in law, sociology, history, ethnic studies, and women's studies. Though initially utilized in legal studies, CRT has been extended to areas such as education (Ladson–Billings & Tate, 1995; Solórzano, 1997, 1998; Tate, 1997), women's studies (Wing, 1996), and sociology (Aguirre, 2000). For our purposes, we introduce some of the tenets of CRT to our discussion of campus racial climate, as it represents a paradigm shift in the extant discourse about race and racism in education. CRT offers insights, perspectives, methods, and pedagogies that guide our efforts to identify, analyze, and transform the structural and cultural aspects of education that maintain subordinate and dominant racial positions in and out of the classroom (see Matsuda, Lawrence, Delgado, & Crenshaw, 1993; Tierney, 1993).

The basic CRT model consists of five elements focusing on: (a) the centrality of race and racism and their intersectionality with other forms of subordination, (b) the challenge to dominant ideology, (c) the commitment to social justice, (d) the centrality of experiential knowledge, and (e) the transdisciplinary perspective (Solórzano, 1997, 1998; Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, in press; Solórzano & Yosso, 2000).[3] Each of these five themes is not new in and of themselves, but collectively they represent a challenge to the existing modes of scholarship. The critical race theory framework for education is different from other CRT frameworks because it simultaneously attempts to foreground race and racism in the research as well as challenge the traditional paradigms, methods, texts, and separate discourse on race, gender, and class by showing how these social constructs intersect to impact on communities of color. Further, it focuses on the racialized, gendered, and classed experiences of communities of color and offers a liberatory and transformative method for examining racial/ethnic, gender, and class discrimination. It also utilizes transdisciplinary knowledge and the methodological base of ethnic studies, women's studies, sociology, history, and the law to forge better understandings of the various forms of discrimination. Indeed, critical race theory names racist injuries and identifies their origins.

[3]For three comprehensive annotated bibliographies on critical race and theory, see Delgado and Stefancic (1993, 1994).

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When the ideology of racism is examined and racist injuries are named, victims of racism can find their voice. Further, those injured by racism discover that they are not alone in their marginality. They become empowered participants, hearing their own stories and the stories of others, listening to how the arguments are framed, and learning to make the arguments themselves. In this article, we take each of these five themes and, where applicable, apply them to the study of racial microaggressions, collegiate racial climate, and the experiences of African American college students.

Methodology

We used a qualitative, focus-group research design to illustrate in greater detail how African American students experience the racial climate of their college campuses. Focus groups are guided group discussions that allow the generation of a wealth of understanding about participants' experiences and beliefs about a particular topic of inquiry. Focus groups have four strengths that enrich the research process in that they provide a methodology to: (a) explore and discover concepts and themes about a phenomena about which more knowledge is needed, (b) add context and depth to the understanding of the phenomena, (c) provide an interpretation of the phenomena from the point of view of the participants in the group, and (d) observe the collective interaction of the participants. Qualitative focus-group analysis examines these students' lived experiences and shows how they can provide a depth of understanding, afford outsiders with greater insight, and be a guide to further research on collegiate racial climate and the impact of racial microaggressions on African American college students. Indeed, the purpose of a qualitative focus group methodology is to illustrate and elucidate the analytical categories of the relationship between racial microaggressions and campus racial climate.

Participants

The study participants consisted of a group of African American students who were attending three elite, predominantly White, Research I universities (two public and one private) in the United States. Thirty-four African American students (18 females, 16 males) participated in 10 focus groups that were convened on the campuses of each institution.

Instrumentation

The focus group interviews covered seven areas of inquiry:

(1) the types of racial discrimination experienced by students;
(2) how students responded to racial discrimination;
(3) how racial discrimination affected the students, including their ability to perform academically;
(4) the advantages of having a critical mass of African American students on campus;
(5) whether or not the racial climate for African American students had improved or worsened on the students' campuses in the past few years;
(6) whether or not the participants would recommend their college to other African American students; and
(7) advice on how better to conduct the study.

Procedures

The focus groups did not represent a random student sample. Focus group participants were recruited using a purposive sampling technique, defined as "a procedure by which researchers select a subject or subjects based on predetermined criteria about the extent

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to which the selected subjects could contribute to the research study" (Vaughn, Schumm, & Singagub, 1996, p. 58). All focus group conversations were tape-recorded with the permission of the participants, and transcripts were made of each taped focus group. Additionally, extensive field notes, research memos, and information from debriefing meetings were compiled for each focus group. The transcripts were later coded and subjected to a thematic analysis.

Data Analysis

We used a grounded theory approach to investigate the concepts of racial microaggressions and collegiate racial climate. Specifically, we analyzed the transcripts, research memos, and field notes by immersing ourselves in the data and systematically analyzing the data for thematic patterns (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). This was accomplished by:

(1) identifying the types of, reactions to, and effects of racial microaggressions;
(2) determining whether patterns could be found in the types of, responses to, and effects of racial microaggressions;
(3) deciding if certain types of, responses to, and effects of racial microaggressions could be collapsed into similar categories; and
(4) finding examples of transcribed text that illustrate the different types of, reactions to, and effects of racial microaggressions.

Results

The following sections describe our findings from the focus group data and offer some general comments on how the racialized context of the college campus leads to a negative and marginalized perception of African Americans students. Figure I shows the relationship between racial microaggressions and campus racial climate. Using Figure I as a guide, we examine the different types of racial microaggressions that take place in academic and social spaces at the postsecondary level. Second, we explore the effects racial microaggressions have on African American students. Third, we describe the counter-spaces African American students create to challenge the racial microaggressions they face. Finally, we discuss the implications of these findings for the study of racial climate on the college campus.

Racial Microaggressions Within Academic Spaces

As mentioned above, racial microaggressions take various forms, including both verbal and nonverbal assumptions about, and lowered expectations for, African American students. Overall, the students in our study described a very tense racial climate both inside and outside their classrooms.

Racial Microaggressions Within the Classroom Setting. Many students spoke of feeling "invisible" within the classroom setting. An African American female student noted that being viewed as a numerical racial minority seemed to translate into being ignored in class: "I think that when the professors see that there's fewer of you, they're less likely to address your concerns." The students in this study also shared that their experiences as African Americans were omitted, distorted, and stereotyped in their course curriculum. For instance, a female student stated: "When she [the professor] gets to talking about the subject of racism, she doesn't say 'racism,' and I'm like, 'No, it's racism.' She doesn't quite understand."

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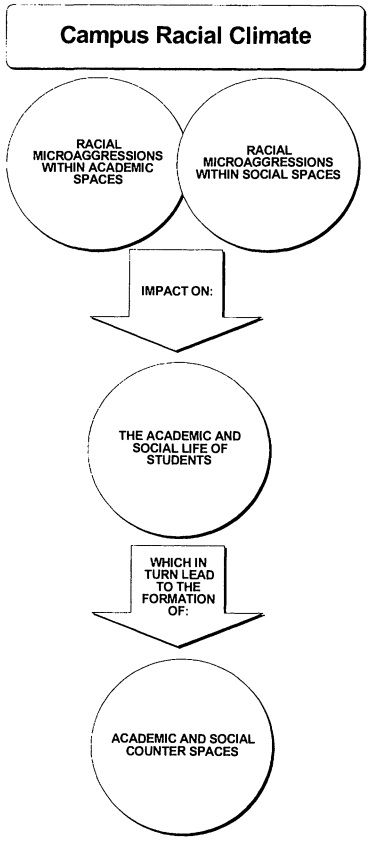
FIGURE I
Racial Microaggressions and Collegiate Racial Climate



The African American students in this study also provided examples of racial microaggressions in faculty–student interactions such as instances when faculty maintained low expectations of them, even in the face of contradictory evidence:

> . . . I was doing really well in the class, like math is one of my strong suits. . . . We took a first quiz . . . and I got like a 95 . . . he [the professor] was like, "Come into my office. We need to talk," and I was like, "Okay." I just really knew I was gonna be [told], "great job," but he [said]], "We think you've cheated. . . We just don't know, so we think we're gonna make you [take the exam] again." . . . And [then] I took it with just the GSI [graduate student instructor] in the room, and just myself, and I got a 98 on the exam.

Ongoing negative interactions with faculty seemed to instill a sense of self-doubt in some of the African American students we interviewed. Many students mentioned the importance of having other African American students in their classes to provide support against stereotype threat. According to one African American female student:

> They look at you [and think], "Oh that's another dumb Black girl in the class." That's how they make you feel. . . . So you don't feel like [saying], "Well, maybe it isn't me" 'cause you second-guess yourself. You're by yourself. If you have more African American students there, then there would be more of a voice, beside your one single voice. . . . [I]f there's more backup [other African American students] there, then you'll feel more comfortable. . . . Then you [won't] say, "Maybe *I'm* stupid! Maybe I don't understand what's going on."

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The students also commented on the racial segregation evident among in-class study groups of their peers. For instance, an African American male student commented on his frustration, noting that he felt isolated because others did not believe he could be Black and still be intelligent:

> . . . [in] a technical field, [as] an engineer, oftentimes you'll feel like other students don't want to approach Black students for their groups, especially when [they think the Blacks are] just not technically smart . . . as maybe an Asian student. And, I'll notice they'll make some [study] groups [and] maybe you'll be the last one asked. So you feel more of a need to establish yourself . . . you need to prove yourself.

An African American female stated that racial discrimination in study group formation was obvious:

> I've had times when a guy in the class . . . [said], "Well, I don't want to work with you because you're Black." And he told me to my face. . . . And it was upsetting 'cause . . . I came here thinking that it wouldn't be like this, and that was naïve.

Another African American female recalled a friend's experience:

> [A Black male student] thought he was going to be pre-med. And he was in this chemistry lab, and nobody wanted him to be in the [work] groups, so his partner . . . turned out to be this deaf girl. I'm sure everybody's looking at them like, "They're never going to pass."

Several of the students we interviewed indicated that beyond feeling like a numerical minority, they also felt personally diminished by nonverbal microaggressions perpetrated by their White counterparts. Other students agreed that merely "looking like" a person of color can be cause for White professors, students, and college staff persons to draw negative assumptions about minorities and lower their expectations of them. They further recognized that being stereotyped carries very real consequences beyond feeling bad about oneself. Some indicated feeling "drained" by the intense scrutiny their everyday actions received in the context of negative preconceived notions about African Americans. Others acknowledged as racial microaggressions the subtle and overt daily put-downs they encountered—or attempted to avoid—in their interactions with some Whites in the academic setting. Such incidents put these African American college students on the defensive to keep from succumbing to stereotype threat.

Importantly, several students indicated that key among the most negative racial assumptions Whites on their campuses held about them had to do with how African American students entered the university—in other words, those assumptions related to how Whites felt about affirmative action. An African American female described some of the assumptions that many students about how Black students entered the university. Her comments reveal the subtle, yet pervasive nature of racism within a negative campus racial climate:

> Most of my experiences in regards to racism have come from students. . . . Like, a couple of our class discussions were about the whole Proposition 209 issue and affirmative action, and [the White] students really thought that the only reason Black students were getting into these universities was because of affirmative action. A lot of them could not fathom that we *earned* our way in here.

Another African American female echoed the above perception:

> Every time I leave my room I'm conscious of the fact that I'm Black. I'm really conscious of the fact that people are looking at me and [saying], "She's here on affirmative action."

Still another African American male described the frustration that his race leads others to make assumptions about his academic abilities and inabilities:

> . . . a lot of people don't accept the fact that I'm here on academics, and actually I got a scholarship for academics. All my scholarships were in academics, and they were not in sports.

Racial Microaggressions Outside the Classroom Setting. Students' responses also provided evidence of a negative racial climate outside their classrooms. Some expressed a generalized feeling of discomfort and racial tension as a result of microaggressions experienced

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in other academic spaces on their campuses. For example, one student asserted that he experienced a distinct level of discomfort when he entered the business school on his campus, noting that "it is like a little environment in itself" and that "a lot of African Americans don't feel comfortable there." Another targeted racism and racial microaggressions within her campus's science department particularly: "I've noticed that in the sciences here at this school, many of the people are racist, including the students and professors." Another recalled an encounter with a White faculty member:

> I was [in the department building] and I was walking down the hallway . . . [and] one of the teacher's doors was open. . . . She's like, "Oh, I should have locked the door. My purse is in there." I was just [thinking to myself], wow . . . maybe [she] should have kept that to [herself] or something, like, oh, I reminded you that you should lock your door!

Other students noted feeling that their very presence in non-classroom campus settings was unwanted and assumed to be inappropriate. For example, one noted the following:

> Last time we went to the library . . . to study . . . obviously, it's finals time . . . people are *going* to study. But when we walked in there looking for somewhere to sit down, it's like . . . they've never seen Black people before in their lives, or they've never seen Black people study before!

Such incidents and feelings of discomfort contribute to the development of a negative racial climate and serve to discourage several of the African American students we interviewed from taking advantage of student services on their campuses. As one African American female student explained:

> I decided to go see a counselor because I wanted to do pre-med and I wanted to make sure I was on the right track. . . . [The counselor] was very discouraging . . . not supportive at all. She finally said, "Well, I don't think that you should take all of those classes. You're not gonna be able to do that.". . . . I personally thought [she discouraged me] was because I was African American.

Whether inside or outside the classroom, racial microaggressions within academic spaces are filtered though layers of racial stereotypes. That is, any negative actions by or deficiencies noted among one or more African American students are used to justify pejorative perceptions about *all* African American students, while the positive actions or attributes of one or a few African American students are viewed as rare cases of success amidst their racial group's overall failure.

Racial Microaggressions Within Social Spaces on Campus. The students in our study related several instances of racial microaggressions experienced outside their academic environments, in social spaces both on and off campus. Indeed, our findings suggest that the collegiate racial climate fosters more covert or subtle racism within academic spaces and more overt racism within social spaces on campus. As an African American male student revealed: "With school events, it's definitely racial. They [the campus police] regulate and try to shut down [Black social functions], and make [us] leave through certain doors." A female student corroborated:

> It's so annoying that everywhere we go, we've got to [be] watched. At the Black parties at the Union, everybody else [Whites and other groups of students] can go [out the front door] . . . when there is a Black party, we had to go out the back door.

Another student described a racial microaggression that took the form of an unspoken yet understood double standard applied to African American students. In her words: "When it comes time for Black students to do things on campus . . . there's a whole set of rules that you have to abide by, whereas the other students, it's like, "Well, you all have a good time." These microaggressions, many of which are directed at African American students by the campus police, appear to be based on notions that African Americans pose a threat to and in these public spaces on their college campuses. For example, an African American male student related an incident that occurred when a group of Black students was playing football on a campus parking lot:

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> . . . it's 11 o'clock [at night] and all of a sudden, [campus police] sweeps up. . . . There's a total of four or five cars, and then we have two cops on the bikes, all here for us who are not displaying any type of violence or anything like that . . . but we're upset. And we're saying at the same time, we're feeling restricted because if we act in a way that we want to react—number one, we're going to go to jail; number two—it's just going to feed into the stereotype that we're supposed to be violent. . . . We actually just stood there out there and just really pleaded our case for at least a good 45 minutes. And they were not trying to hear us at all. We had to leave the parking lot. . . . Once again, it reminded me I'm a Black man [on a predominantly White campus].

Effects of Racial Microaggressions

Racial microaggressions in both academic and social spaces have real consequences, the most obvious of which are the resulting negative racial climate and African American students' struggles with feelings of self-doubt and frustration as well as isolation. This means that the African American students on the campuses studied must strive to maintain good academic standing while negotiating the conflicts arising from disparaging perceptions of them and their group of origin. Additionally, they must navigate through a myriad of pejorative racial stereotypes that fuel the creation and perpetuation of racial microaggressions. As a female focus group participant explained:

> It's not fair on the African American students. [I have] to be on my guard every time I go in to talk to a professor, every time I go in and talk to the advisor, every time I go and talk to *anybody*. I'm like, are they here really to help me or are they going to lead me down the path that I don't want to go down?

The students also noted that being a member of a racial minority on their predominantly White campuses placed them in a position where they were perceived by others to represent the voice of their entire race. Steele and Aronson (1995) identify this "spokesperson pressure" as a part of stereotype threat. An African American male student explained it in the following manner:

> . . . a lot of times if they're having a discussion on whatever topic, you feel like you're going to get called on, just because they want a Black perspective and you're the only [person] that can speak on it. . . . It's definitely had an impact on how [Black students] perform in school. . . . A lot of times you're gonna be the only one in certain classrooms.

An African American female simply iterated that the role was "tiring."

The sense of discouragement, frustration, and exhaustion resulting from racial microaggressions left some African American students in our study despondent and made them feel that they could not perform well academically. These stresses contrast those cited by White college students, whose greatest stress typically originates from personal issues (Muñoz, 1986). As one female African American student admitted, the cumulative effects of stereotype threat made her feel "helpless." Another concluded: "All the beliefs and thoughts I had coming here [to the predominantly White campus] were extinguished." Another female student stated that her overall academic performance had been negatively affected by the racial climate on her campus, asserting that the experience was "kind of intimidating" because in several of her classes, she was the only Black person in the class; thus, it was harder for her "to participate and get involved and get interested."

Several students commented that racial microaggressions had affected their academic performance in overt ways such as pushing them to drop a class, changing their major and even leaving the university to attend school elsewhere. As one African American female student maintained:

> In many respects, I was naive, but now I'm cynical. . . . When I took my science courses, I had to fight every day through all the racism I felt. . . . Each time I took a new class, the same thing happened over and over and over and over again. Many times I was the only African American in the class. [The White students and professors] were like, "You know what, I don't think she knows what she's talking about," or . . . "Well, you got here because of affirmative action, not your grades or your merit." And when you try and voice something to somebody, they don't want to hear it. They're not *about* to hear it! And they're

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like, "Well, you need to be along with your other peers." I'm upset. I'm tired of it. That's why I changed my major to English.

Another African American female student maintained that the racial microaggressions she had endured at her university had pushed her to the point of exit:

> I can't stand this school and I'm ready to leave. And that for me is how I feel. I know this is the real world and I've learned that. . . . I know how I'm going to take what I want to do to get what I need to get. . .

Yet another female student related the experiences of an African American friend who was transferring to an historically Black university:

> . . . she got a B in physics before she came. She took physics again . . . she did her problems, got everything [in], and got a D on her exam. She looked at her friend's exam; he was a White person, and he had gotten an A, and they had the same, almost the same exact answers on the exam. . . . So she went up to the [graduate student instructor] and asked him . . . "What's going on?" He [says] to her, "Well, I have not really been around Black people, or people like you before . . . I don't think you did well on the test." So she went up to the professor, and the professor didn't do anything. She went to the chancellor. The chancellor had her drop the class. . . . Her parents are the ones who are paying for her education, but see, the first thing [the chancellor] asked her was whether or not she was on financial aid. So now she's mad, upset, and going to be transferring to Howard University.

Creating Counter-Spaces as a Response to Racial Microaggressions

In response to the daily barrage of racial microaggressions that they endure both in and outside of their classes, the African American students who participated in our focus groups indicated that they are creating academic and social "counter-spaces" on and off their campuses. These counter-spaces serve as sites where deficit notions of people of color can be challenged and where a positive collegiate racial climate can be established and maintained. Counter-spaces on the three campuses participating in our study were created within African American student organizations, organizations or offices that provide services to African American and other students, Black fraternities and sororities, peer groups, and Black student-organized academic study halls. Some of these counter-spaces were co-created with African American faculty and exist within classrooms. Others existed within more social settings.

As Solórzano and Villalpando (1998) have determined, academic counter-spaces allow African American students to foster their own learning and to nurture a supportive environment wherein their experiences are validated and viewed as important knowledge. According to our focus group participants, social counter-spaces were important because they afforded African American students with space, outside of the classroom confines, to vent their frustrations and to get to know others who shared their experiences of microaggressions and/or overt discrimination. For example, one male student explained that he sought out such a counter-space for support at his university:

> . . . that was one of the reasons why I chose to live on the African American theme floor [among the campus dormitories] . . . because if I go home [at the end of the day] and I don't have the support, then that can really be discouraging. . . . [Y]ou need some type of support to get through this thing . . . and if you're a freshman coming in, you don't know African American faces . . . you need somewhere to start.

Two African American female students shared similar conclusions:

> . . . I just feel more comfortable dealing with African American people in every aspect . . . counseling, financial aid. I just look for the first African American face I find because I feel like they're going to be more sympathetic.

> You know how you have African American crews, African American fraternities, and so forth. And then my sophomore year here, I was thinking about joining an African American sorority, and [a White fellow student] said, "Why do you want to join a African American sorority? Are those other sororities not good enough? You think that we're only White?" I said, "I don't think they're only White. It's just that . . . I don't want to say [they're] anti-African American, but I don't feel welcome in your sorority." And she said, "What do you think we are, the Klan?" [and] I was like, "Okay, we're not going to go there."

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Many social counter-spaces also serve as academic counter spaces and vice-versa. For example, some students indicated that their study groups evolved into friendship groups and community outreach groups that provide them with educational, emotional, and cultural support. As a female African American student related:

> . . . the benefit that I have gained from [a study group of African American students] is that my involvement in the African American community has grown, and that's where I found a lot of my support. Even in terms of academics, I go study with the "homies" all the time. Go to [a certain student lounge] and you're going to see a million African American faces, and it's going to be cool. . . . You might not get that much studying done, but it's a cool little network that's created because classes are so uncomfortable.

It was noted, however, that the social counter-spaces had a "down side" among their positive attributes. As one African American male explained: "Trying to be involved in all these things [Black-focus organizations] and deal with activities to make sure your voice is heard can adversely effect your study habits."

Marginalized students are often familiar with their groups' voices being silenced in the classroom discourse or with having their personal and/or group experiences and beliefs discounted. These negative experiences occur in addition to the pervasiveness of the cultural-deficit discourse in the academy (Valencia & Solórzano, 1997). Perhaps as a response to their position of marginality on their campuses, the students in our study seemed to create academic and social counter-spaces along racial or gender lines. Nonetheless, in separating themselves from racially or gender-uncomfortable situations, this group of African American college students appeared to be utilizing their counter-spaces on their own terms. This confirms that the creation of such counter-spaces is an important strategy for minority students' academic survival (Solórzano & Villalpando, 1998).

Conclusion

In a 1998 study, educator and researcher Grace Carroll asked African American college students in her classes and workshops to answer the following three questions:

> 1. Have you ever been the only African American person in a class or meeting and a so-called black issue comes up and suddenly you feel all eyes are on you—that you are supposed to have the "appropriate response"—that you speak for all African Americans?
> 2. Have you ever watched the news and a particularly violent crime is described and your first reaction is: "God, I hope the perpetrator is not black"?
> 3. Have you ever been in a store, bar, or restaurant ad felt you were next in line for service only to see that a white patron got served instead?" (p. 3)

Carroll noted that her participants usually answered "yes" to each of the questions, concluding that their responses indicated the presence of "mundane extreme environmental stress" (p. 1), which is similar to what we define here as racial microaggressions. The students in the present study would probably also have answered "yes" to the above questions.

This study of racial microaggressions has helped us to extend and apply a racial microaggressions analysis to the study of campus racial climate. It has further allowed us to recognize, document, and analyze racial microaggressions from the perspective of African American students and listen to the voices of those who experience and are affected by racial microaggressions. Indeed, race, racism, racial stereotypes, and the campus racial climate must continue to be viewed through the lenses of African American and other students of color. The experiences of these students demonstrates that even at high levels of accomplishment (i.e., at elite undergraduate universities), where educational conditions might on the surface appear to be equal, inequality and discrimination still exist—albeit in more subtle and hidden forms. Perhaps, the study of the cumulative impact of racial microaggressions at each point in the educational system offers further evidence of the

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very different road that African American students must travel. It also reveals the strength they possess in overcoming both macro-level and micro-level barriers along that road.

The experiences related by this group of African American student participants raise two additional questions specifically related to the contemporary affirmative action discourse:

(1) Is the educational playing field level for African American students as they make their way through the collegiate system?
(2) Should a student's success and persistence in the face of racial discrimination be considered as a factor in the undergraduate, professional school, and graduate admissions process?

The answer from the students in our study to the first question would be a resounding "NO!" The answer to the second would be a resounding "YES!" Indeed, their descriptions of racial microaggressions challenge the anti-affirmative action ideology of college as an equal, colorblind, and race-neutral institution. They resonate with the essence of Pierce's (1970) comment: "It is my fondest hope that the day is not far remote when every black child will recognize and defend promptly and adequately against every offensive microaggression" (p. 280). Thirty years later, Pierce's vision has not yet come to pass. Indeed, very little is known about who, when, where, and how racial microaggressions are initiated and defended against. Without careful documentation and analysis, racial stereotypes, the threats that they pose and the assaults they justify in the form of racial microaggressions, can easily be ignored or downplayed. Nonetheless, these findings demonstrate that the cumulative effects of racial microaggressions can be devastating. It is our hope that further research into these subtle forms of and responses to racism and sexism will advance examinations of the conditions and concerns of African American and other students of color and move educators toward making Professor Pierce's hope a reality.

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